

Idaho governor allows \$320M road plan to become law

BY KIMBERLEE KRUESI

Associated Press

BOISE, IDAHO — A frustrated Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter allowed a \$320 million transportation funding plan to become law on Tuesday, despite lodging multiple criticisms against key aspects of the measure.

"Transportation has been one of the central focuses and primary frustrations of my three terms as governor," Otter wrote in his transmittal letter to lawmakers and to the secretary of state's office.

Otter went on to lament that mistrust and misunderstanding inside the Statehouse has stifled efforts to come up with a long-term solution to address the state's aging infrastructure. Nevertheless, Otter said he could not veto the bill because he had no hope that lawmakers would successfully come up with a better solution in 2018 since they would be too worried about the upcoming election cycle.

In Idaho, the governor has small window to sign or veto bills once they reach his desk. If the governor chooses to do nothing, then the bill automatically becomes law.

The new transportation plan is primarily made up of \$300 million in bonds to pay for new road projects and repay it with future federal highway payments.

However, the plan also includes funneling 1 percent of the state's sales tax revenue —which go into the state's general fund — to pay for other infrastructure projects. This roughly \$15 million marks an unprecedented shift in lawmakers' willingness to use previously taboo fund road and bridge maintenance.

That's because general funds pay for public schools, and lawmakers have long resisted creating a competing stream that could threaten to take away money from education.

Roads and bridges have previously been solely funded by relying on fee-for-service revenues, such as from gasoline taxes or vehicle registration. This has created a system with not enough revenue to help cover the costs of maintenance and construction, leaving the state with an annual \$262 million transportation deficit.

In his 2015 annual address to lawmakers, the only section of Otter's speech to be in all-caps and underlined was the Republican governor's reiteration that he would block any effort to dip into the general fund for road construction and maintenance.

"So while I hope that lawmakers will reconsider the provision carving out 1 percent of state sales revenue from our general fund, House leadership has expressed to me that such reconsideration is highly unlikely," Otter wrote. "But that is a discussion for the interim and beyond."

The Republican governor also criticized House lawmakers, specifically calling out leadership, for refusing to budge on blazing a trail to begin using general funds for roads.

Yet House Assistant Majority Leader Brent Crane, R-Nampa, defended the plan. As a representative from Canyon County — a region that has been plagued with congested traffic corridors and raised public safety concerns with a rise in vehicle accidents — Crane said that it doesn't matter if Idaho has the best schools if there are no roads to get to them.

"Idaho is one of seven states that doesn't use general funds for roads," Crane said. "I think it's time. We have enough money for schools and roads."



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